



Women's safety matters

advocacy

action

commitment

**A Footprint of
30 years and beyond**

“Heartfelt thanks to the individual members who have shared their lived experiences and their expertise to consult together in the cause of improved women’s mental health in Victoria.”



Acknowledgements

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Women's Mental Health Network Victoria

Our Commitment

Giving women a voice for their rights, dignity and hope
Keeping women's issues in the public eye
Collaborating for responsive mental health services
Advancing the cause of mental health for women

Originally named Victorian Women and Mental Health Network Collective, the story of the Women's Mental Health Network Victoria (the Network) began in 1988. A small number of volunteers came together with the dream of a better mental health system for women. It was a time of change and upheaval as the mental health sector negotiated out of the institutional bind and into the community.

For most of its history, the Network has relied on volunteers to carry out its important work. Over the past seven years we have been successful in securing project-specific grants to advance our cause. Philanthropic trusts such as The Reichstein Foundation have allowed us to employ staff from time to time. We have demonstrated what even a modestly funded organisation of committed individuals can do for those it represents.

Since the release of the *National Inquiry into the Human Rights of People with Mental Illness* Report 1993, we have collaborated with state governments and mental health agencies. Together we have highlighted deficiencies in mental health policies, practices and services in Victoria and beyond our state borders.

We collaborate for a responsive mental health system that is accessible, easily navigated and brings about healing.

Since mixed-gender inpatient mental health treatment became the norm in the 1960s, many women have resisted hospital admissions for fear of abuse by male consumers (VMIAC, 2013). For women in this system, gender sensitive care and safe practice is essential to their recovery. This is a key tenet of our work with government and on the ground services.

Advances have been made for the implementation of safer women spaces and women-only corridors in mental health facilities. However, safety is compromised when males are moved into women-only areas. Our goal is to work with government to increase funding to extend the safety of female inpatients to include gender separate wards as an indisputable policy line and practice direction.

Gender sensitive practice and trauma informed care should be core pillars of education for the mental health workforce and beyond. The Network endorses a national and state workforce policy approach that encompasses a gender-sensitive and trauma informed care education program. By focusing all workforce education on gender equality, it is not just left to a few champions within health services to fund a response.

A responsive health system is a human rights issue - the Network will continue to position itself on this platform. We will keep women's issues out in the public space and provide women with a voice so that healing environments are the focus for policy makers and direct service providers. We shall network with women consumers, carers and workers to transform service responsiveness. We shall empower women through consumer designed programs and consumer designed workforce development.

The Network aims to continue its vital work and requires funding to ensure we can centralise the different activities in which we are involved. We aim to give women a voice for rights, dignity and hope.

Actions for Change

- > Continue to Build Mental Health Awareness by Widespread Networking, Social Media Campaigns and Targeting of The Media
- > Promote Women-Only Corridors being used for their purpose in mental health facilities
- > Build an Alliance for Gender Sensitive Services Across Australia
- > Provide Our 30 Years of Innovative Thinking to Advance the Mental Health Cause for Women
- > Prioritise Women Living in Regional and Rural Areas
- > Empower and Inform Women Consumers via Training and Forums
- > Advocate the Need for Gender Sensitive Safe Practice Education to be an Integral and Continual Part of The Tertiary Health Professionals' Training
- > Champion and Guide All Workforce Training to Include Gender Sensitive Safe Practice as its Core
- > Promote More Research and A Gender Lens on any social Data collection and Analysis Practice

We will advance the cause of mental health for women with resolve and purpose.

Over the past 30 years, the Network has been a champion of change through advocacy. We have been a voice for women with lived experience in the quest for women's mental health equality and social justice today. We are grateful for all the women who have come on our journey thus far. Theirs is a story of great courage.

Committee of Management 2018

A Short 'Herstory' 1988-1998

As energy for change grew it followed suit that calls for action from a small group of women emerged.

Funding from the Office of Psychiatric Services assisted the group to run a two-day conference in November 1989. A core organising group comprising women from government and community managed services and consumer groups continued to meet to implement the recommendations of the conference.

“Our advocacy rite of passage had begun.”

Over time the group has changed, inviting new members and incorporating new directions and priorities. The Network has sponsored forums on issues of concern to women. The group prepared a submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry concerning the Rights of People with a Mental Illness, and has provided papers at a number of conferences. In 1990 the group convened a half day workshop with visiting Canadian woman and mental health activist, Helen Levine.

In 1992, an extremely successful forum on sexual assault was organised by the Network. Women from clinical and non-clinical services attended and the Network has continued to follow up recommendations and directions developed during this forum.

Where it all Began

by Merrilee Cox

In the mid-80s in Melbourne, Barb Wigley, Anne Woods and I began talking informally about the ways feminist approaches might guide practice in community mental health settings, both clinical and psychosocial. The growing feminist practice literature and the emerging knowledge about the impact of trauma and sexual abuse on women's mental health wasn't reflected at a service delivery level. This was particularly the case in the public system, where the medical model reigned supreme.

Most of the women we worked with could not afford the feminist counselling options available at the time.

“Women with mental health difficulties were often excluded from women's refuges and other services as their needs were considered too high.”

This, combined with a commonly-held suspicion of the mental health system, meant they could not get the help they needed through either mental health or women's services.

As workers in public mental health, we had all personally experienced and witnessed the pervading sexism of the service system. It placed little value on women's physical and psychological safety. We were keen to see the public system provide services informed by psychosocial principles that offered a safe, inclusive and empowering approach. We wanted to see services tailored to women's needs and a feminist approach supported and encouraged.

We joined the Women and Therapy Network (WTN), but found its focus to be primarily on private practice and individual therapy. So, we initiated the Victorian Women and Mental Health Network (VWMHNC) with the encouragement of WTN members including Lindsey Howie, Margaret Goding, and Val Gerrand (Senior Social Worker in the Mental Health Branch).

We invited clinical and psychosocial disability services to an initial meeting to gauge interest. Very quickly we had an enthusiastic group of women meeting on a regular basis to raise awareness and provide support for each other. Eventually, we decided to incorporate as an organisation so we could apply for funds to support our work. We decided that a conference would be a way to both raise awareness and develop an action agenda for the Network.



A conference working group of about 15 women put together a great program of workshops and presentations. We obtained financial support from the Department of Health and resourcing from VicServ (now Mental Health Victoria). Anne Ball did the lovely design for the conference poster and we were overwhelmed by the interest in both presenting and attending at the conference.

A range of initiatives came out of the conference, with the safety of women as a primary focus. High on the agenda were the need for gender specific services for women, the development of a resource to support gender sensitive practice and research into experience of childhood sexual abuse of women with mental health difficulties.



It seemed like an idea whose time had come.

Over the past 30 years, the Network has been greatly supported through the philanthropic sector, particularly the Reichstein Foundation. We have also received funding through the Department of Health, Healthsharing Women (now Women's Health Victoria) and VicServ.



One of the great ongoing strengths of the Network is its wide reach, including women with lived experience, clinical services, psychosocial disability support services and women's health. It's clear that the issues which triggered the formation of the Network have not gone away. **The safety of women remains under threat.** Organisations such as ours continue to have an important place in ensuring a trauma- and gender-informed approach to service delivery. Long may it continue to grow and thrive.

**OUTRAGE TO
DETERMINATION...**

A Changing World

By Sandy Jeffs

In 1988 the world was a vastly different place. There were no mobile phones, no internet and no social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter. The Victorian mental health services were soon to undergo a radical reconfiguration, including deinstitutionalisation. At that time, mental health care was accessible only via the big stand-alone psychiatric hospitals and a host of small Non-Government Organisations. These organisations provided advocacy, housing and supported accommodation, and sought to intersect with government to inform mental health policy.

The medical model of mental illness was embedded in psychiatric services, although psychosocial rehabilitation was beginning to inform notions of recovery. Into this environment stepped the visionary women - Merrilee Cox, Barb Wigley, Anne Woods - who saw a need to advocate for women who used mental health services.

They incorporated a healthy dose of feminist theory and sisterhood fervour into their agenda of making services better, more sympathetic and safer for women.

And so, the Women's Mental Health Network Victoria was founded in 1988. I love that they used the Venus symbol when they referred to women in their meeting minutes, a symbol used by feminists. It's amazing that they could organise an active network so efficiently without the social and organisational tools we take for granted. Members volunteered their time and initially met in each other's lounge rooms and kitchens.

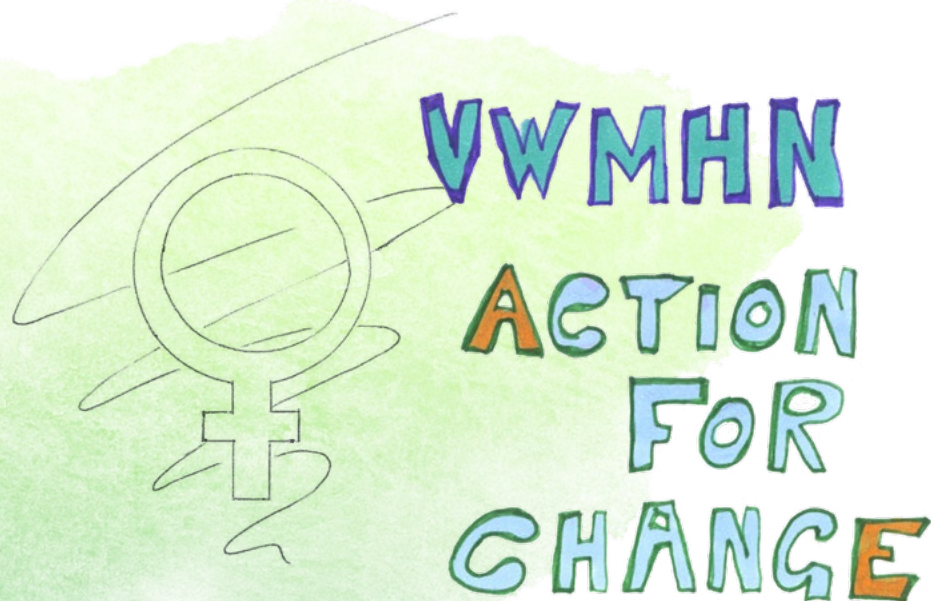
By the time I came to the Network sometime in the 2000s, feminism as a political force had waned somewhat in favour of postmodernism and cultural studies. However, the Network I encountered still had women front and centre in its advocacy agenda.



The first meetings I attended were at the VicServ offices in North Fitzroy and were chaired by the inspirational and highly effective Heather Clarke. I heard stories and testimonials from women who had suffered distressing experiences in psychiatric wards; not in big loony bins but in the new acute wards in the general hospitals. Nothing had changed from my time in Larundel Psychiatric Hospital in the years stretching from 1978 to 1991 compared to reports of women's experiences in the mid-2000s onwards. The issues were the same and women's safety was still a festering sore for psychiatric services.

“*Being part of the Network opened up new avenues of advocacy and put me in touch with women who were passionate and emboldened to make services better and safer for women.*”

These women raised my consciousness about issues that, while they had touched me personally, were wider than my own experience.



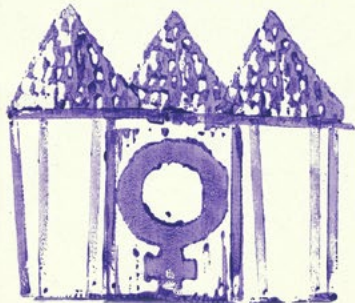
A Short 'Herstory' 1998-2008

Following the desegregation of Victorian psychiatric wards in the late 1960's, lack of safety became a major issue for female patients with women reporting frequent intimidation, sexual harassment and even sexual assault during admissions to the mixed sex environments.

In 2005 the Network began a project to continue to raise awareness of these issues. This included surveys of consumers and service providers, a postcard campaign and Listening Events. The Network realised that women were being left behind; that whilst change had occurred slowly, there was still work to be done. We needed to continue to champion change for safer hospital systems as well as to shift the stigma for women as they navigated complex health care at multiple health system entry points.



DIRECTORY OF SERVICES FOR WOMEN IN MENTAL HEALTH



Consolidating the Vision

By Heather Clarke

My involvement with the Network began in 2002 when I was working as a social worker in clinical mental health. I had come from community health where we had a strong feminist and gendered understanding of health and mental health. I was keen to link with other mental health service providers who shared this kind of lens. Maggie McGuinness, a key Network organiser for many years, spoke of the danger of the organisation coming to an end unless more women became involved.

Along with Kim Waugh (Pahran Mission), Sam Clavant (CASA House), Christine Osbourne (mental health nurse) and Dorothy James (Community Mental Health), I contributed to the organisation of Quarterly Forums focusing on key issues affecting women's mental health.



We were committed to the idea that improved responsiveness to the mental health needs of women could best be achieved through dialogue between women consumers and mental health professionals.



Our forums always provided speakers from each of these perspectives.

The first forum focused on the lack of safety for women in mixed sex inpatient units. Sue Armstrong, a women's mental health activist with lived experience, was the guest speaker. This issue had been raised over a period of time by organisations including the Mental Health Legal Service and South East Centre Against Sexual Assault. Despite some progress, it is an issue that remains unresolved.

A second Network forum in 2005, titled *Women on the Wards*, focused on the problem of sexual assault in hospitals and was attended by over 40 women. This was our biggest attendance to date and confirmed the importance of the issue. It was at this meeting that I met Julie Dempsey, who was one of our guest speakers, and we began a long and fruitful Network connection.

In 2006, the Network invited women consumers and mental health service providers to a forum on their experiences of inpatient environments. Surveys from 75 women revealed that a majority (61%) of women consumers had experienced harassment or abuse during their inpatient admissions. Of the 42 staff surveyed, 70% acknowledged that harassment and abuse was occurring in psychiatric wards. This survey informed the *Nowhere to be Safe* report during 2008.

The Network's next step in raising awareness was a postcard campaign calling on the government to 'Ensure safety for women in psychiatric wards' by providing more separate sleeping areas. This resulted in 4,500 postcards being sent to the Health Department and created the impetus for a meeting with Bronwyn Pike, the then Minister for Health. At this meeting she agreed to fund a Mental Health Branch project to develop guidelines to improve gender sensitivity and safety in acute inpatient units.

In 2007 the Network received \$5000 to hold 'Listening Events' to provide an opportunity for women mental health consumers to speak about their experience of mixed sex inpatient care. Five Listening Events were held around the state and the overwhelming message shared by women who attended was that they did not feel safe in hospital.

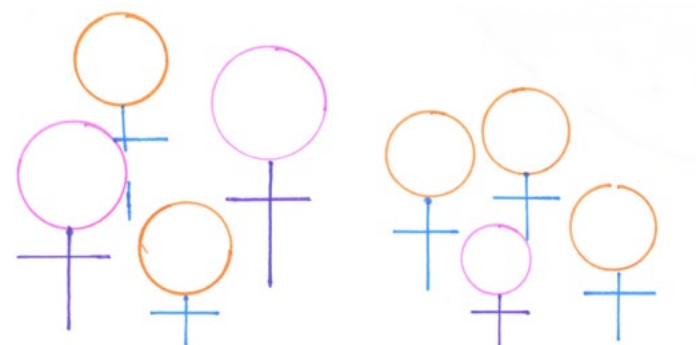
Using the results from the survey and postcards designed by women who attended the Listening Events, the *Nowhere to be Safe* report was published in 2008. The report highlighted the lack of safety experienced by women. It showed that a majority of women admitted to psychiatric wards had previously experienced physical or sexual assault and were therefore vulnerable to re-traumatisation. It also contained *Women's top ten suggestions to improve inpatient safety* - recommended changes to improve inpatient environments. This report received considerable attention from media and within the mental health sector.

Over the years, the Network has raised awareness and provided training not only for mental health clinicians but for managers, professional associations, nurses, social work and other health students and of course, politicians. Whenever possible, we have used the women consumer/service provider model, a proven approach that has resonated with our audience and brought about change in service provider practice.

What stands out for me in reflecting back over my Network years are the widespread and wonderful connections that were created through our work. A few key examples include:

- > The ongoing support of Dr Sabin Fernbacher from Northern Area Mental Health Service (NAHMS) and through her, the involvement of Robyn Humphries, then NAMHS Area Manager with whom the Network co-presented at the International Women's Mental Health Conference in Melbourne
- > The ongoing encouragement of Professor Jayashari Kulkarni from the Research Centre for Women's Mental Health at the Alfred and Monash University
- > The inspiration and guidance of Keran Howe from Women with Disabilities Victoria, as well as staff from Women's Health Victoria
- > The staff at the Mental Health Branch, Department of Health, the then Chief Psychiatrist, Ruth Vine and Minister for Health, Bronwyn Pike

Thanks to all these people and organisations for their support of the Network's advocacy and for listening and responding sensitively to the mental health needs of the women we worked to represent.





REAL
WOMEN

RIGHT
ON



What the Network means to me

By Jude Stamp

Having experienced the mental health system at first hand, I have come to appreciate the Network's unique ability to represent the consumer voice. It is critical that the women who use the system evaluate the system, if government and service providers are to receive genuine feedback on its progress.

The Network provides the insights of consumers into what is needed for effective care. This is achieved through focus groups, training sessions and presentations at conferences and forums on key issues for women consumers. Sandy Jeffs, Julie Dempsey and I are consumer members of the Management Committee and have talked to women across Victoria, interstate and internationally. I was fortunate enough to be sponsored by the Department of Health to present at the *6th World Conference on Progress in Mental Health in 2010*. Along with June Hopley, another committee member, I flew to Washington to present a paper on ground-breaking work in improving staff training around greater gender sensitivity in the care for vulnerable women.

I have been a member of the Network for over ten years, and have been part of a Management Committee that decides on the best strategies to take the Network forward. We owe a huge debt to the women who struck a blow towards liberating women from insensitive treatment 30 years ago. There is still much to do - and progress demands that we need to respond to the challenges in different and innovative ways. I invite you to share in the exciting future of the Network and help us make the decades to come as productive as the past decades. It is a history worth celebrating.

A Short 'Herstory' 2008-2018

The main objective of the Network in its early years was to resource and support women around mental health issues.

Since then, it has morphed into a group of more than 100 members and 30 organisations providing a united voice for change in multiple areas, positioning itself state-wide.

The Network provided the support base from which likeminded people in regional and rural areas could springboard activities to agitate for small but significant gender sensitive changes in mental health services. It was a decade of possibilities. It provided a space for aspirational thinkers to meet, inform and support each other to improve the experiences of women living a full life with the challenge of episodes of mental illness.

There were volunteers who were tireless and self-sacrificing in their work to further the Network aims. A pivotal event was the trip to Washington DC for the *6th World Conference on the Promotion of Mental Health and Prevention of Mental and Behavioural Disorders*. There, Jude Stamp and June Hopley represented the Network to an international audience, advocating for a gender responsive approach to the treatment of mental illness.

Strengthening our Capacity

By Cheryl Sullivan - Project worker and then Executive Officer

My association with the Network commenced in 2006. I was working with women who were experiencing homelessness. Having spent most of my working life in community and indigenous health, homelessness was a new area and I quickly came to realise that most of the women had a diagnosed mental illness. Their stories also often divulged a background of sexual abuse. On the suggestion of Heather Clarke, I attended my first Network meeting, and thus commenced my involvement, firstly as Project Officer and then as Executive Officer.

Funding was – and remains – an issue. In 2008, the Mental Health Council of Australia in conjunction with the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) offered Capacity Development Grants for smaller NGO organisations. With the help of a friend of the Network, Ron Exiner, in preparing the submissions, we were successful in receiving funding for a number of projects:

- > The development of a business plan undertaken by Margaret Goding, one of the original members
- > An overview of the gender service provision within the Acute Psychiatric Units, undertaken by Heather Clarke. (This resulted in the 2009 report, *Increasing safety and gender sensitivity in mixed sex psychiatric units: a project report.*)
- > The provision of training sessions focusing on the booklet *Nowhere to be Safe*, published in 2008.

This training took Julie Dempsey and I to each of the Adult Acute Psychiatric Units throughout the state, where we introduced the topic of gender sensitive care. We were also privileged to see the results of a small Department of Health grant, offered in response to a Network meeting with the then Minister for Health, Bronwyn Pike.

“The provision of a women’s safe space within each unit affirmed that significant changes can be made with a small amount of funding.”

About this time, the Reichstein Foundation funded the Network for a part-time executive officer. This funding continued for several years and enabled us to pursue many of our key goals, including promoting gender sensitive care for women patients in the Acute Units. It also provided the means for women to attend Network functions, thus ensuring their voices were heard, particularly through the Women’s Forums.

Working with the Department of Health was a vital way of ensuring that the issue of women’s safety remained on the agenda. Following the meeting with Bronwyn Pike, the *Gender sensitivity and safety in adult acute inpatient units* report was initiated. One of the recommendations arising from it was a Chief Psychiatrist’s guideline, resulting in the *Promoting sexual safety, responding to sexual activity, and managing allegations of sexual assault in adult acute inpatient units* guideline 2009. This was one of the first major boosts for women’s safety since the 1997 *Victoria’s Mental Health Services: Tailoring Services to Meet the Needs of Women* report.



Prior to the State Election in 2010, the Network undertook a post card campaign and launched its ‘Call To Action 2010: A 5 Point Plan’.

In a press release on October 5, 2010, the then Shadow Minister for Mental Health, Mary Wooldridge, committed to providing \$4 million towards three of the five requests in the ‘5 Point plan’. Minister Wooldridge subsequently announced funding for:

- > establishing specific spaces and other safety improvements for female patients in inpatient mental health services
- > capital projects that improve the safety, security and comfort of women in mental health inpatient facilities
- > training initiatives for mental health staff in the implementation of relevant Chief Psychiatrist and Service guidelines to ensure that a culture of gender sensitive practice becomes embedded in acute and community mental health services



By 2011 The Alfred was the ‘first public hospital in Victoria to have a psychiatric ward refurbished as a women’s only unit, with five dedicated beds, a living area and courtyard’. Capital works were also funding small improvements and modifications to other acute hospital wards.



In response to the WMHNV commitment to embedding gender-sensitive practice in all services it was also announced that the Network was 'provided with \$100,000 towards the development of a gender sensitive training module' for the Gender Sensitive Guidelines 2010. Janet Snashall-Woodhams was contracted by WMHNV to develop the training package. Focus groups of both consumers and mental health workers were consulted to ensure all appropriate issues were covered. The training package contained four modules:

- > The Importance of Gender
- > Safe Practice
- > Communication Skills
- > Building Capacity



The package was launched in April 2013 by the Minister for Mental Health, Mary Wooldridge. The implementation of the program was awarded to The Centre for Psychiatric Nursing. Staff from every Victorian Adult Acute Mental Health Service underwent training over two sessions.

In both metropolitan and regional areas, sessions were conducted for both trained and trainee nurses in the need for gender sensitive care for acute care patients.

It was for many participants their first introduction to the issues faced by women and the various forms abuse takes.

Funding continued to be received from a variety of philanthropic trusts. The Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation donated funds to develop a Communication Framework, including the establishment of the Network's website.

The R E Ross Trust gave a grant to 'strengthen capacity'. This paid for the printing of annual reports, and for conference fees for women consumers. It provided a contribution towards office space and associated accommodation expenses at drummond street services, and towards the establishment of contacts with women in regional and rural areas of Victoria.



The Victorian Women's Trust gave financial support to develop *Women Speak Out*, a five-week program to develop women's public speaking skills and empower women's active participation on committees and boards.



This project was successfully conducted on two occasions with very positive outcomes. The Trust, along with the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation, donated funds to pay for Bree Hayes to implement these projects.

Throughout this time, the Network presented at many conferences, ensuring issues of safety for women remained on the agenda. These conference presentations included:

- > VicServ 2010 and 2012
- > The 2010 6th World Conference on the Promotion of Mental Health and Prevention of Mental Health Behavioural Disorders held in Washington, USA
- > The Collaborative Psychiatric Nurses Conference in 2011, 2012 and 2013
- > TheMHS Conference in 2011, 2012 and 2013

All these achievements were the result of teamwork. A consumer was present at every training session or presentation, and this responsibility fell most frequently to Julie Dempsey and Jude Stamp. The committee of management all participated in the various sub-committees to see the work through to completion. They were wonderful years and a time for which I am most grateful.





Reachout Programs

By Kaite Stewart

My association with the Women's Mental Health Network Victoria started in 2013 when I participated in the 'Women Speak Out' (WSO) introductory training program. At the time I was attending Splash, a very positive art program run by Neami.

While at Splash, I picked up a WSO flyer that said in part 'if you would like confidence in public speaking, contact WMHNV.' I had been looking for something different and for some reason this caught my attention.

The WSO Program provided me with the opportunity to look at various issues. It was the first time I had written something about my mental health that was not part of therapy. It also opened the way for my participation in other group activities.

Following the program, I went with members of the Network to participate as a facilitator in the Breaking the Silence program in Morwell Victoria. This program designed as the rural equivalent of the WSO program was being developed in partnership with SNAP Gippsland (currently known as within Australia) and ran as a pilot program in 2015.

Prior to that, I had not spoken in public many times. After my participation in the program, there was an occasion that I stood up at a WMHNV AGM. While I could not necessarily articulate exactly what I wanted to say, I had the confidence to address the group-

I would not be able to stand up and address a crowd like this if it was not for the WSO program.

This 'little trick' now helps me whenever I have to speak in public.



Since that time, I have maintained contact with Julie Dempsey, Jude Stamp, Cheryl Sullivan and Bree Hayes, who ran the *Breaking the Silence* program. These people have become personal friends and not simply members of the Network.

I will not speak about my personal mental health journey as I believe this is something personal and discussed with mental health workers. I have always kept my mental health and friendship groups separate, so much so that there are a very small number of people who know about my mental health challenges.

I am happy that I participated in the program and would encourage other women to take part should the program be run again. I hope it will in the future. It's a program that can change lives and deserves funding to continue its work.

Photo: Mosaic artwork by Kaite Stewart

Ensuring Safe, Responsive Care

By Julie Dempsey - Executive Committee

I have been an executive member of the Committee of Management since 2005 until the current time.

Being a part of the Network has given me an effective and supportive avenue to advocate for other consumers, carers, and mental health workers. I have met and networked with fellow consumers and other key players in the mental health sector and Victorian government. On a personal level, it has lifted me out of the confines of isolation and horrific psychosis, and back into the world of the living.

The mere wretched survival instincts that dominated my life for many decades have been replaced with the feeling of being part of a shared social community.

My 2005 address to the WMHNV *Women on the Wards* forum was only my second presentation in public since I had become incapacitated by mental illness a couple of decades earlier.

I was discussing what was now a central aspect of my life: frequent hospital admissions in an involuntary capacity. If that was not disempowering enough, in those admissions I was subjected to sexual assault, physical and sexual threats and physical injury.

I was living in an atmosphere of harassment and intimidation by the male patients with whom I was forced to co-exist.

My war stories ranged from being confronted with men with their hands down their pants as a frequent dayroom activity, to rape and the subsequent suicide of female friends I had met during my incarceration.

My life changed after meeting Network members and hearing others speaking out.

The forum marked the beginning of my journey from submissive and hopeless psychiatric patient to empowered political mental health advocate and activist.

In 2008 I had a devastating three-month hospital admission in which I was subjected to sixteen electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) sessions. The immediate result of the shock treatment was extensive memory loss, both short- and long-term, as well as significant cognitive disruption. I had forgotten my delusions, along with major segments of my life.

Cheryl Sullivan, a member of the Network at the time, invited me on a road trip to Mildura. We were to talk to the staff and patients at the local mental health hospital about gender sensitive care and the issues faced by female patients at the facility. It led to a successful engagement with nursing staff and female patients, as well as visiting their female only space, 'The Butterfly Room', which was funded by our efforts lobbying government.

On a personal level, the journey in the car with Cheryl was life-transforming. We were getting to know each other and discovering common links with places and people we knew. Cheryl would ask me questions about my life that would trigger lost ECT memories. Unfortunately, when the memories returned, so did any initial trauma I had associated with them. Cheryl was very kind and gently talked me through things as they surfaced.

It was my first trip outside Melbourne's outskirts for many years.

On that Recovery journey, I regained lost life, redeveloped the confidence to travel, and made a life friend.

A highlight of 2012/13 was the development and introduction to mental health services of WMHNV *Building Gender - Sensitive and Safe Practice* training. We consulted extensively with a wide variety of stakeholders both directly within and outside the mental health sector. From this expertise, we developed a relevant and accurate best practice training tool with which to teach and engage the mental health workforce.

The training is strengthened using vignettes of consumers and workers talking about sexual safety issues and related workforce challenges in addressing these problems. Filming the media excerpts was sobering at times, but added a powerful authenticity to the topic.

An unexpected blow to the Network was not receiving the main contract to rollout the *Building Gender - Sensitive and Safe Practice* training we had developed for the Department of Health. The contract went to the Centre for Psychiatric Nursing, a large professional organisation. Being a small, mostly volunteer-based NGO, we are often overlooked for the delivery of major government contracts despite our proven expertise in the mental health sector.

Despite the best efforts of successive Executive Officers, Convenors and Committee of Management members, we have been unable to achieve long-term permanent financial security for the Network's activities. Lack of sustainable recurrent funding has been an ongoing issue throughout the life of the Network. We no longer have the funds to employ an EO, which limits our capacity to function in the mental health sector as effectively and extensively as we would wish.

Thanks to the gallant and successful efforts of our volunteer members, our grant and donation incomes have enabled us to complete many worthwhile projects. We have also received government funding in blocks for specific work projects, however this is an unpredictable and inconsistent income source.

Being essentially an advocacy service, it is neither suitable nor desirable to have total government funding. However, in a cash strapped sector, alternative options are becoming scarcer.



The Women's Mental Health Network Victoria has had a 30-year history of service to a community of women like me, who have the potential to become active members of society and advocates for other women.

I would like to see our work of empowering women to stand up for their basic rights continue until we achieve safety for women consumers in psychiatric services. By adopting gender sensitive cultures, securing protective female only environments, and delivering respect and dignity in life and illness for both consumers and workers alike.

My ultimate aim and wish is to be a rebel WITHOUT A CAUSE anymore.



Achievements

- 1988**
 - Victorian Women and Mental Health Network initiated
- 1989**
 - Inaugural Women and Mental Health Conference - 'Strategies for Change' funded by Office of Psychiatric Services VIC
- 1990**
 - High profile mental health rights Forum with Canadian Activist Helen Levine
- 1992**
 - Sexual violence rights and safety Forum
 - Submission to Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry concerning the Rights of People with a Mental Illness
- 1993**
 - Advocacy related to the release of the National Inquiry into the Human Rights of People with Mental Illness
- 1995**
 - Incorporation of Network
 - Domestic Violence and Mental Illness Forum
- 1996**
 - Women-only respite programs Forum
- 1998**
 - Speaking Out: *Women's Experiences of Mental Health Services*, Publication
- 2000**
 - *Directory of Women-Sensitive Mental Health Services*, Publication
- 2006**
 - Building partnerships between mental health, family violence and sexual assault services - report investigating connection between those sectors Inpatient experiences Forum
- 2007**
 - Listening Events consultation and survey of women's experiences on safety in hospitals
 - 'Listening to Women Consumers' Experiences in Mixed Sex Psychiatric Wards' Publication
- 2008**
 - *Nowhere to Be Safe* Publication
 - The gender sensitivity and safety in adult acute inpatient unit's project Outrage becomes determination: Advocating to raise awareness of women's experience in mixed sex psychiatric wards Heather Clarke and Julie Dempsey Publication
- 2009**
 - Promoting sexual safety, responding to sexual activity, and managing allegations of sexual assault in adult acute inpatient unit guideline 2009 Chief Psychiatrist Office Expert Advisory Committee
 - Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council Conference
 - Increasing Safety and Gender Sensitivity in mixed sex psychiatric units: Gathering Information about clinical mental health service initiatives Publication
- 2010**
 - *Call to Action – Victorian State Election 2010: A 5 Point Plan*
 - VicServ Conference
 - The Network initiates Gender sensitive training for mental health professionals statewide
 - Gippsland Mental Health Conference
 - 6th World Conference on the Promotion of Mental Health and Prevention of Mental and Behavioral Disorders Washington USA Victorian Collaborative Psychiatric Nursing Conference

- 2011**
 - *Service guidelines on gender sensitivity and safety. Promotion of a holistic approach to wellbeing* 2011 Advisory Committee
 - Women's Mental Health Network Victoria registered as charity - positioning itself as a statewide voice
 - The creation of separate areas for women in adult acute psychiatry inpatient units
 - VicServ Conference
 - TheMHS Conference, Mental Health Learning Network
 - Victorian Collaborative Psychiatric Nursing Conference
- 2012**
 - Outrage to Determination. Real Women Right On! VWHMH Action for change Julie Dempsey Publication
 - Lobbying government provision for A\$6m to establish gender specific mental health spaces in existing mental health services, including women-only corridors.
 - Commitment by State Government to a women's only prevention and recovery care centre (Springvale)
 - TheMHS Conference, Mental Health Learning Network
 - VicServ Conference
 - Victorian Collaborative Psychiatric Nursing Conference
- 2013**
 - Building Gender - Sensitive and Safe Practice Publication
 - Gender sensitive safe training package developed and launched
 - TheMHS Conference, Mental Health Learning Network Victorian Collaborative
 - Psychiatric Nursing Conference
 - 7th Australian Women's Health Conference
 - Meaningful Life - Journey to Recovery Forum
- 2014**
 - Training roll-out to Acute Psychiatric Inpatient Units across Victoria led by the Centre for Psychiatric Nursing Victoria
 - The Network secures the License for provision of gender sensitive training statewide
 - Building Gender - Sensitive Safe Practice - training program
- 2015**
 - Forum on Royal Commission on Family Violence - Women's Lived Experience
 - Submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence - recommendations taken up
 - Info for Women website directory for Womens - Sensitive Mental Health Service
- 2016**
 - Your Hospital Stay: Have Your Say Forum
 - Survey conducted with women consumers & health workers hospital experiences
 - Raising awareness of gender sensitive issues in the Australian context with World Health Organisation - Geneva
 - Alfred and LAMPS Diversity Conference
 - Entry for The Horne Prize – 'Australian life' picture of how it is for women: *A Story of Madness* Sandy Jeffs Publication
- 2017**
 - Consultation and training Report DHHS on promoting sexual safety and gender sensitive guidelines statewide
 - *Building in Safer and More Productive Outcomes for Consumers and Mental Health Workers: Key Findings of the Network's 2016 Hospital Experience Survey* Publication
- 2018**
 - Mental Health Complaints Commissioner Forum on sexual safety The Right to be Safe Report panel
 - The Right to be Safe Report - Reference group

Publications

- 1998** • Speaking Out: Women's Experiences of Mental Health Services
- 2007** • Listening to Women Consumers' Experiences in Mixed Sex
• Nowhere to Be Safe Psychiatric Wards' 2008
- 2008** • Outrage becomes determination: Advocating to raise awareness of women's experience in mixed sex psychiatric wards; Health Issues: Journal of Health Issues Centre (Autumn Issue) by Heather Clarke and Julie Dempsey
- 2009** • Victorian Women and Mental Health Network: Increasing Safety and Gender Sensitivity in mixed sex psychiatric units: Gathering Information about clinical mental health service initiatives
- 2010** • Call to Action 2010: A Five Point Plan to Ensure safety for women in acute psychiatric wards
- 2011** • Outrage to Determination. Real Women Right On! WWHMH Action for Change by Julie Dempsey
- 2013** • Building Gender - Sensitive and Safe Practice: Final Project Report
- 2014** • Building Gender - Sensitive Safe Practice -training program
- 2016** • A Story of Madness by Sandy Jeffs for WWHMV entry The Horne Prize – 'Australian life' picture of how it is for women.
- 2017** • Building in Safer and More Productive Outcomes for Consumers and Mental Health Workers: Key Findings of the Network's 2016 Hospital Experience Survey

The Women's Mental Health Network Victoria is an organisation of consumers, carers and workers who aim to improve the lives of women with a mental illness by advocating for safe and effective services that are sensitive to women's needs.



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